

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 463 269

SP 040 576

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TITLE Asian-American Teachers: Issues of Curriculum and Support.
PUB DATE 2002-00-00
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Teacher Educators (Denver, CO, February 2-5, 2002).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Asian Americans; Collegiality; Curriculum Development; Elementary Secondary Education; *Minority Group Teachers; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Participation

ABSTRACT

Asian Americans have long been underrepresented in the U.S. teaching force. While the number of Asian American students entering U.S. schools is booming, the already-small proportion of Asian American teachers is shrinking. This study used a survey to examine the problems Asian Americans face as minority teachers in one midwestern state, the impact they felt they had on curriculum and academic experiences at the building level, and support systems available to them to implement desired changes. Responses from 34 Asian American teachers indicated that they felt they were well accepted and well integrated into the school system, their concerns were heard, and other teachers and administrators supported them. Most were the only Asian Americans in their schools. They did not appear to be overly concerned about being underrepresented in their schools or in the curriculum. Only three respondents related their ethnicity to the curriculum content formally (offering language and culture clubs), and three others brought their experience and "otherness" into the curriculum informally. Asian American teachers were not involved in curriculum development. Respondents believed that students were conscious and appreciative of their teachers modeling a minority status. (Contains 19 references.) (SM)

**ASIAN-AMERICAN TEACHERS:
ISSUES OF CURRICULUM AND SUPPORT**

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association of Teacher Educators,

Denver, February 2-5, 2002

SP040576

Abstract

Asian-Americans have long been underrepresented in this nation's teaching force. While the number of Asian-American students entering U.S. schools is booming, the already-small proportion of Asian-Americans in the teaching force (about 1%) is slowly shrinking. The purpose of this study was to understand the impact Asian-Americans in a Midwestern state may have on curricula and academic experiences at the building level, and support systems available to them to implement desired changes. The survey showed that Asian-American teachers have little effect on the curriculum or the academic experiences of students. They feel accepted by students and are supported by their parents, administrators and peers.

ASIAN-AMERICAN TEACHERS: ISSUES OF CURRICULUM AND SUPPORT

Schools have always acknowledged their 'enculturation' role as agents of cultural reproduction and that curriculum plays a large part in transmitting the EuroAmerican norms that are seen as the primary American culture. There is little doubt that schools should be more inclusive and school-based personnel should appreciate and affirm what minority teachers bring to facilitate the development of a culturally relevant curriculum that is academically rigorous (Quiocho & Rios, 2000). The significance and importance of global education and culturally relevant curriculum have been thrown into relief by the events of Sept. 11, 2001. The urgency to understand and be accepting of diverse cultures and viewpoints has grown since that catastrophe. The possible positive effects of a culturally responsive curriculum have been detailed (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1992b; Sleeter & Grant, 1991). Among other benefits, it helps students build an identity by comparing what they have learnt in the classroom with their own experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1992b). The need for teachers to be affirmed in the value of cooperation and the importance of a caring community (Zimpher & Ashburn, 1984?) is possible with a culturally responsive curriculum.

Yet there is no systemic effort to genuinely shift from a Western perspective to include other perspectives and materials ((Foster, 1994, cited in Quiocho & Rios, 2000; Gay, 2000). Race and race-related pedagogy are not considered appropriate topics for discussion among faculty members and issues regarding them are not raised in faculty forums (Foster, 1994, cited in Quiocho & Rios, 2000). Where there is no self-examination, there is unlikely to be an expectation of

overt support. Further, culturally congruent approaches to teaching can render teachers suspect by the broader school community since such approaches do not conform to the mainstream (Foster, 1994; Lipka, 1994, cited in Quiocho & Rios, 2000). The result is that the voices of minority teachers have been silenced and many of them do not have a role as decision-makers beyond the everyday decisions that teachers make in the classroom (Quiocho & Rios, 2000).

These issues as they relate to Asian-Americans have other features that complicate the matter. The term 'Asian-American' embraces many cultures and languages, making it difficult to define a coherent cultural identity. Through they are classed as one group for purposes of census and numbers, the sub-groups such as Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Korean, Vietnamese and Taiwanese differ widely in matters of language, religion and cultural practices and beliefs. This lack of coherence in turn prevents the ethnic group from being validated so that only a narrow slice is represented in the broad spectrum of the curriculum (Gay, 2000).

In the past three decades, the Asian-American population has been notable as the 'model minority' but overlooked in terms of the demographic profile in spite of a dramatic increase by 63%, making Asian Americans the fastest-growing of all the major racial/ethnic groups in the U.S. Nearly a fourth of Asian-American are under 17 and of school-going age, accounting for about 3% of the total K-12 student population. (Smith, Rogers, Alsalam, Perie, Mahoney and Martin, 1994) but are only 1.2% of the nation's teaching force (Snyder & Hoffman, 1994).

Unlike other minority communities, there is no scarcity of qualified persons in a community in which 37% aged 25 or older hold a college degree. Yet,

specifically among Asian-American women who hold degrees, only 1% goes into teaching, a profession still dominated by women. Many of the rest opt for jobs in technical and scientific fields which are higher-paying and where discrimination is perceived to be less of a barrier to advancement (Rong & Preissle, 1997; Su, Goldstein, Suzuki & Kim, 1997).

Among all ethnic groups, the extremely limited research that is available on Asian-American teachers is a matter of deep concern (Quirocho & Rios, 2000). The available data focus on issues of motivation, explaining why Asian-Americans are drawn to teaching and what may keep them in the profession (Gordon, 2000; Rong & Preissle, 1997; Su, Goldstein, Suzuki & Kim, 1997). There are no studies that address the effect Asian-American teachers could have on the curriculum or the issues they may have to deal with in their work environment (Gay, 2000; Quirocho & Rios, 2000).

The purpose of this descriptive study was 1) to understand problems Asian-Americans may face as minority teachers; 2) to examine any impact they may have on curricula and academic experiences at the building level, and 3) to identify support systems available to them to implement desired changes.

Methodology

A survey of 23 items based on the research questions was designed. Fifteen of these items dealt with issues of identity of the Asian-American teachers and other professionals in the building. Five items explored the respondents' perceptions of the effect of their ethnicity on the curriculum and related activities in school. Seven items focussed on how peers, administrators, students and their

parents related to issues of acceptance of their identity, and support that was or could be offered. Three items questioned the respondents about on their awareness and membership of professional ethnic support groups. Since the sampling frame of Asian-American teachers available was small, to test for a minority perspective the survey was piloted with African-American teachers.

The Midwestern state chosen for study mirrored the changing national demographics with regard to the Asian-American population (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1997). A list of all Asian-American teachers, obtained from the state Department of Education, provided an initial sampling frame of 106. Deletion of those no longer teaching and additions of names suggested by respondents defined a final sample of 96.

The final survey, with a cover letter and a stamped envelope for returning the completed survey, was mailed to all participants. Reminders over a period of two months included postcards, phone calls and duplicate surveys. Forty participants responded to the survey for a return rate of 41.7%. Four of them declined to participate; they felt their ethnic identity as Asian-Americans was not relevant to their identity as teachers. Another respondent stated that since he was mistaken for a Caucasian, his responses were not relevant. A sixth respondent chose not to complete the survey since the questions dealt with "delicate issues." Eventually 34 surveys were deemed useable. The data were coded and categorized by the researcher using open coding techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Findings and Discussion

Curricular issues

The presence of Asian-American teachers appears to have little effect on the curriculum or the academic experiences of students, and core content courses were not affected by the presence of Asian-American teachers. Given that five of the respondents stated that they did not see themselves as Asian-American, it is likely that their curriculum is not affected by ethnic perspectives.

Of the 34 respondents, only three related their ethnicity to the content formally. Two offered Japanese and Chinese languages in their schools. The Japanese language teacher was also in charge of an after-school Japanese club. A music teacher incorporated a few Japanese songs into the repertoire. While Ladson-Billings (1992a) states that there is a distinct ethnic-specific cultural preference for language that teachers bring into the classroom, these respondents do not express it. It may feature in their curriculum and their classrooms if they taught the language or if they incorporated it sporadically in their teaching to illustrate a point.

Three other respondents brought their experience and knowledge of 'otherness' into the curriculum informally. They referred to world literature and global issues while discussing their content; this was not a requirement of the curriculum but was made possible by their wide experience. For example, a teacher from India compared Third World conditions to the U.S. to illustrate differences in life styles and to inculcate sensitivity to environment issues.

Any other references to the ethnicity of the Asian-American teachers were sporadic and incidental. Four others said they incorporated activities related to their culture in their classroom but were not specific about the purpose or the learning

expected from the students. Eight of the thirty-four responded that they had been used as resource persons by other teachers in the building. In a scenario that is easily recognized, they were invited to talk to other classes about their culture and ethnicity and country of origin or affiliation. The topics most often included food, festivals, customs and rituals, especially of marriage. On a more personal and serious note, a Japanese-American was asked by his peers to talk to their classes about the experiences of Japanese-Americans interned in concentration camps in the U.S. during World War II.

Decision-making

Since their interaction with the curriculum was so limited, it is not surprising that the Asian-American teachers are not involved in the making of the curriculum. They do not have the opportunity to transform either the structures or the people in their working environment.

With the exception of one school building which had three Asian-American teachers, all the other respondents were the only Asian-Americans in their schools. This lack of critical numbers may preclude their having an impact on decision-making at the building level.

The teachers were cautious about establishing an alternative culturally responsive pedagogy and curriculum, unlike those studied by Su (1997). Except for two respondents, none of the others expressed a desire to be involved in re-designing the curriculum with a view to incorporating A-an-American elements. Rather than see schools as sites for diversity, anti-racism, social justice and transformation (Feuerverger, 1997; Foster, 1994; Klassen & Carr, 1997, cited in

Quiocho & Rios, 2000), these Asian-American teachers appear to want to maintain the status quo.

The Japanese language teacher stated that he wished that he were included in decisions regarding establishing or abolishing a foreign language department or offering Japanese but seemed to have no belief that his wish would be granted. A second respondent was both skeptical and cautious about her presence on any decision-making body. She believed that there was a danger of "being tokenized or less than appreciated because the teachers may have little understanding of non-mainstream experiences."

Issues of support

Administrators and peers

The needs of Asian-American teachers were generic teacher needs in the areas of teaching, curriculum and discipline and they appreciated the support they receive from both administrators and their peers.

Of the 34 respondents to these set of questions, 15 stated that they were supported by their peers in two areas: professional and personal, while 12 felt that they were not. Being asked to teach languages and invited to talk to classes on topics related to their ethnicity were seen as expressions of appreciation. Yet most of the support they asked for was not a curricular re-alignment but in terms of student discipline.

The fact of a teacher being unwilling to respond to an anonymous survey is deeply disturbing and is a telling comment on the insecurity that some Asian-American deal with in their work environment. If the respondent was being

supported as a professional, there should have been no hesitation in sharing a positive experience. The reluctance to address what is probably an unpleasant situation may point not only to an unsupportive atmosphere but also a peer group or administration that could be unpleasant.

Students

Asian-Americans are proud of their ethnicity and yet wish to blend in with dominant group (Gordon, 2000b). This dichotomy of appearance and perception was clearly noticeable in their interpretation of student appreciation. Asian-American teachers were pleased both when students noticed their ethnicity and when they did not. They welcomed being treated like all other teachers regardless of their ethnicity. On the other hand, they enjoyed the attention students paid to their different cultural background.

Fully a third of the respondents indicated that their ethnic identity did not impinge itself on the students. They believed that they were successful teachers because they were like any other teachers and exhibited the same characteristics of concern and caring. As one respondent colorfully phrased it, "I could be purple and still (the students) would enjoy my class, hopefully because I teach with caring and love." Another respondent commented, "More than 80% of my students and parents like and appreciate the things I'm doing to help my students learn. I use my lunch hour to help the slow students. I always find time to help my students."

The most common expression of interest and appreciation from students appeared to be how they notice the difference in their teachers who are Asian-American. Students' curiosity is piqued by their teacher's ethnicity and teachers

saw this as an indication of a positive attitude. Students' questions about their teachers' personal background and culture, and teachers sometimes felt that students "look to me as a source of information about Asia." This curiosity is also about the country of origin." They love to see some real samples from China/Taiwan and hear about the Chinese zodiac.

Beyond seeing the teachers are sources of trivia, two clear statements made by the respondents point to their belief that students are conscious and appreciative of the teachers modeling a minority status. They "appreciate the fact that (the teacher) can connect with them in different ways... can talk about skin color and speaking languages other than English with a certain depth of understanding."

Respondents were also subliminally conscious that students' perceptions of race and ability are influenced by the teacher's ethnicity. As one respondent said, "My students realize that teachers don't just come in black and white background. Anyone with the right qualifications (education) can become a teacher."

Professional support groups

Teachers felt the need for such support systems as would help them in their professional life, which are at present not available to them. There are two professional organizations that are based on Asian-American ethnicity: the Chinese Language Teachers Association, and an organization for music teachers founded by one of the respondents. Yet except for two respondents who identified one each, the others were unaware of their existence.

Eighteen of the respondents indicated that they would join a group that addressed Asian-American issues related to teaching and teachers while nine did not wish to be part of any group.

Conclusion

Asian-American teachers appear to be well integrated into the school system and feel they are accepted, their concerns are heard and that other teachers and administrators support them. Nor do they seem to be overly concerned about being underrepresented in their schools or in the curriculum. This may be attributed to many reasons including their definition of a successful identity and the price they are not prepared to pay for visibility.

Gordon's (2000b) observed that Asian-American students and the Asian-American community desire to be 'normal,' to fit in. Whether it is to be accepted as "honorary whites" so as not to remain "forever foreigners," or to get by in a racist society by staying quiet and behaving so that nobody would bother them (Tuan, 1998), Asian-Americans indicate a desire to assimilate and to nullify their Asian roots. This may also account for so few of them making a concerted effort to bring into play as professionals their ethnicity and the richness it could provide to the curriculum.

It is questionable whether Asian-American students are celebrated and appreciated as members of a specific culture. Accounting for only three percent of the student body, they are clustered along the East and West coasts and are not in evidence in large parts of the country (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Further, viewed as a 'model minority,' self-esteem issues that are cited in support of African-

American and Hispanic profiles in the curriculum may not appear to be applicable to Asian-American students. And Asian-American teachers may choose not to query that position.

Ethnic organizations may exist in part because of the prejudice of the majority and in part because of the desire of the community to maintain its identity (Gordon, 1964). Professional support groups may help Asian-American teachers retain their cultural and ethnic identity without jeopardizing their career or professional status. Exploring and affirming their identity and finding ways of understanding and valuing the depth they can contribute to diversity in a school setting may mitigate the marginalization of Asian-American teachers.

The U.S. perceives itself as a unique multiracial and multiethnic society. Schools claim to help their students value and celebrate diversity. Raising the profile of the largely invisible Asian-American teachers in schools is a viable starting point in achieving these objectives.

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